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**Adult Literacy Programs:
Producing Adult Literacy Research That Informs Policy**

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Abstract: During the past decade, state and federal policy makers have made significant changes in domestic policies that significantly affect how adult literacy programs are organized, what potential students are considered eligible for classes, how long students can participate in classes and programs, who pays for classes, and other programmatic decisions. However, these policy decisions, although based on some research, are oftentimes not informed by adult education research. This paper addresses the issue of developing an adult literacy research agenda that effectively informs federal and state policy decisions particularly as these relate to adult education and the U.S. opportunity structure, the challenge to the GED diploma, welfare reform and adult literacy, family literacy programs, and adult literacy and multicultural learners.

Introduction

During the past decade state and federal policy makers have made significant changes in domestic policies, e.g., the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, and the 1997 welfare-to-work program, that gave widespread support of “Work-First” approaches to welfare reform. In addition, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 gave broad support of family literacy programs as opposed to adult-only programs. These and other related legislation significantly affect how adult literacy programs are organized, what potential students are considered eligible for classes, how long students can participate in classes and programs, who pays for classes, and other programmatic decisions. However, these policy decisions, although based on some research, are oftentimes not informed by adult education research. Consequently, adult educators at the level of practice, struggle to assist students to learn in a tangle of red tape and bureaucratic obstacles that perhaps could be avoided if adult education research was taken more seriously by decision makers in Washington, D.C. and in state capitols around the country.

The issue of developing an adult literacy research agenda that effectively informs federal and state policy decisions is integral to the success of practice. Too often, adult education research is conducted after significant policy decisions have been made. This paper addresses the issue of developing an adult literacy research agenda that effectively informs federal and state policy decisions particularly as these relate to adult education and the U.S. opportunity structure, the challenge to the GED diploma, welfare reform and adult literacy, family literacy programs, and adult literacy and multicultural learners. Such policies have a direct bearing on the practice experienced by adult literacy practitioners.

Assumptions and Background

One goal of adult education research is to assist the field to fulfill the “project of modernity.” In this regard, modernism is committed to logic, reason, and the scientific method. It assumes that these are the tools that lead to the discovery of truth (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). It recognizes that the scientific method is capable of producing solutions to the problems of the world and that there are no limits to where the search for truth may lead (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). Shaped by grand narratives of progress and emancipation, the promise is that our research and educational practices will induce positive changes which lead to progress which supports democracy, freedom, equality, justice, and prosperity.

These assumptions underlie the research agenda adopted by The National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy. The center is a collaborative effort that includes four major universities and a non-governmental organization. Its mission is to conduct research, development, evaluation, and dissemination needed to build effective, cost-efficient adult learning and literacy programs. The agenda is organized around four broad based questions:

- How can the motivation of individual adult learners be sustained and enhanced?
- How can classroom practice be improved?
- How can staff development more effectively serve adult learning and literacy programs?
- What impact does participation in adult learning and literacy programs have on an adult’s life and how can this impact effectively be assessed?

These questions are appropriate in the context of the modernity project. With the exception of the last question, the agenda fails to address some of the pressing issues faced by the field on a macro policy/political level. Research at this level holds the promise of continued support from the public and from potential clients. Therefore, I have other questions that should guide research and practice.

Adult Education and the U.S. Opportunity Structure

My first question is: To what extent do adult literacy programs mitigate the effects of social and economic disenfranchisement experienced by the great majority of students targeted by such programs? That is, to what extent do our programs make a significant difference in the life-chances of students? There is abundant research-based evidence that K-12 and post secondary education programs do not provide a ladder of opportunity for significant numbers of low-income Americans to raise above their original stations in life. The most convincing evidence is provided by a fourth follow-up study to the National High School and Beyond Study that was initiated in 1988. At that time, the study sample was comprised of about 8,000 eighth graders. In the year 2000, these former students turned 26. The study found that 83% had earned a high school diploma. An additional 9% had earned an alternative GED credential, and 8% had dropped out of high school and failed to complete by either method. Nearly 60% of students from the highest income families obtained a bachelor’s or higher degree in 2000; compared to 24% of middle income students; and 7% of low income students. Middle income students did about three times better than low income students, and the highest income students did about 2.5 times better than Middle income students (Education Statistics Quarterly, Web Site). Clearly the schools did a poor job of assisting students to rise above their original stations in life. Would longitudinal studies of adult literacy program participants demonstrate significant positive

effects? Another finding of the study was that nearly half (i.e., 48%) of GED holders were single parents, compared to 37% of school non-completers, and 27% of HS graduates. These data suggest that adult literacy programs have assisted GED holders to obtain a completion certificate despite their single parent status. However, the credibility of this credential is now being questioned.

The Challenge to the GED Diploma

My second question is: To what extent does the GED certificate offer realistic opportunities for completers to attend and complete college, and compete successfully for viable employment opportunities? More than 1 million adults took one or more of the five GED tests in 2001; representing an increase of 31.6% over 2000. However, this number represents only 2% of the adult population without a diploma. More than 95% of U.S. colleges and universities admit students with GED certificates. The GED testing program has served as a bridge to further education and employment opportunities for about 15.4 million people. Two thirds of the candidates who take the tests indicate they plan to pursue further education and training. However, there is an increasing chorus of voices expressing concern over the meaning of a GED and the promises it makes to test takers. For example, James Heckman, an Economics Professor at the University of Chicago, is leading a team of researchers who are documenting the poor performance of GED holders. They argue that GED holders are more likely than dropouts and high school graduates to break the rules, as measured by their answers to a survey. Holders of the GED have high rates of self-confessed vandalism, shoplifting, drug use, and fighting at school. Heckman and Steve Cameron found that, controlling for prior years of education, a GED holder earned about the same wages as a high school non-completer. Male GED holders were 15 times more likely to drop out of college than male high school graduates. They also concluded that when compared to high school graduates, GED holders are twice as likely to drop out of a two-year degree program and 12 times more likely to drop out of a four-year college. Heckman's research shows a 25% increase in high school dropouts since 1975. At that time only one in seven non-completers earned a GED; today, half of all non-completers in this age group are GED holders. The GED Test Service indicated that 37% of test takers were below the age of 19 in 2001, and the average number of years of school completed has remained stable for the last ten years at 9.9 years. In addition, Duncan Chaplin, a researcher at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. warns that teenagers are being given a misleading signal that a GED is similar to a high school diploma.

Although the research cited above is based on survey design methodology, it does provide policy makers some evidence that suggest access to the GED certificate should be more greatly controlled, e.g., by limiting the access provided to teenagers. In addition, there is currently little research-based evidence to support the contention that the GED is indeed a second chance credential that substantially contributes to the life chances of low-literate adults above and beyond their expectations as school non-completers. If policy changes are going to affect changes in the type and level of access to the GED, shouldn't those decisions be based upon strong research designs, e.g., longitudinal designs involving comparison groups of similarly matched samples of high school and GED students over a long period of time? To my knowledge no such research is being planned and the GED is slowly losing its credibility among some policy makers. The field is being challenged to provide solid evidence that a GED matters in the lives of such students and we have not met that challenge.

Welfare Reform and Adult Literacy

My third question is: To what extent has adult education research contributed to the development of a social system that integrates social welfare, workforce development, and adult literacy policies and practices to extend the ladder of opportunity to workers in low-wage jobs? Welfare reform legislation (e.g., the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) that trumpets a “work first” approach minimizes students’ access to education and training. This legislation imposes strict time limits on recipients and requires all who are capable to obtain immediate employment. The mandate to caseworkers is to move recipients to the workforce as quickly as possible and to reduce dependency on cash assistance. As a result of these changes in welfare policy and the positive labor market conditions during the welfare reform era, national welfare caseloads have substantially decreased. According to Brauner and Loprest (1999), from the peak of welfare caseloads in March, 1994, to September, 1998, the national caseload of welfare recipients decreased by 43%. In Wisconsin, the cash assistance caseload during this period decreased by 89%, the highest in the nation.

With the success in reducing case loads and assisting many recipients to obtain employment, welfare agencies have been challenged to grapple with the issue of post-welfare reform, i.e., the retention and advancement issues that surround the work life of former welfare recipients. Nationally, as employers have dipped deeper into the pool of recipients, they have experienced increased difficulty managing such employees. For example, Holzer (2000) surveyed 750 employers in four metropolitan areas: Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Cleveland. He found that the average duration of employment for newly hired recipients was 8 months, although significant percentages left after just 3 to 4 months.

Martin and Alfred (2002) surveyed financial and employment planners and other staff of welfare agencies in Wisconsin. They identified seventeen issues and barriers that affect the employment retention and advancement efforts of former welfare recipients in Wisconsin. These were organized into four categories based on their interrelated characteristics. Situational Barriers which included problems with child care, transportation, housing instability, caring for other(s) with a disability, and being victims of crimes. Education and Learning Experience Barriers included a lack of motivation to work, poor interpersonal skills, low literacy skills (i.e., written English, verbal and math skills), immigrant status (i.e., limited English ability). Personal Issues included problems with substance abuse and domestic abuse, and being charged with a crime. Lastly, disabilities included struggles with mental, learning, and physical disabilities.

Martin and Alfred (2002) also identified the following types of educational services and programs that were provided to mitigate the effects of the above barriers. *Soft Skills Training* included a mix of several training programs (e.g., Parenting and Life Skills training, and Job Readiness and Motivation training) designed to provide participants with the interpersonal relationship skills and pre-employment skills necessary to allow them to be more successful in the workforce. *Employment skills training* (e.g., Job Skills Training and Customized Skills Training) was provided to directly develop skills that are specific to participants’ immediate employment goals. *Educational programs* (e.g., Adult Basic Education, General Educational Development, English as a Second Language) included a mix of several educational programs designed to provide participants with a broad base of general knowledge that would make them more attractive to potential employers. Lastly, *mentoring programs* were provided to pair more skilled or experienced individuals with a newly employed participant to help him/her succeed in the workplace.

The training policy for current and former welfare recipients is fragmented, and it contributes to the disparity of employment opportunities and earnings gap among high-wage and low-wage earners. Carnevale (1999) observed that the current public policy promises “college-first” for the most advantaged, and “work-first” at low wages for everyone else. He cited data with indicated that this country spends over \$200 billion annually on postsecondary education, vs. \$7 billion for training. Employers spend about \$60 billion a year for formal training and 180 billion for informal training. However, only the most educated workers, i.e., those with postsecondary education (or the top 20%), receive training. Therefore, a lack of appropriate skills and academic certifications make it increasingly difficult for low income workers to access employer-based education and training programs as a means to work their way out of poverty.

A challenge for literacy practitioners is to develop a continuum of programs that provide an appropriate mix of literacy instruction, with varying degrees of context and skills that can help current and former recipients both acquire and maintain employment (Martin, 1999). There is little adult literacy research to provide guidance to suggest which curriculum approaches are more effective with what categories of welfare recipients. Also, policy makers are interested to know what individual educational plans are appropriate for low literate employed former welfare recipients. Such plans should assist these individuals to acquire the credentials and skills required by employers in order to access employer-provided education and training programs. Currently, practitioners must use inspired guesses to address policy makers’ concerns.

Family Literacy Programs

My fourth question is: To what extent do family literacy programs significantly increase adult’s (parent’s) and children’s literacy development as compared to traditional (adult only) programs? Over the last ten years, evaluations of family programs have generally been so positive that funding for family literacy has greatly increased and a variety of models have sprung up around the country. Not only has the funding for Even Start, the major federally funded family-literacy effort, increased, but subsequent federal legislation for adult basic education has referenced family literacy in the Workforce Investment Act, the Head Start Act, the Community Service Block Grant, and the Reading Excellence Act (Peyton, as cited in Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002). Family literacy has also been addressed in funding tied to libraries and the K-12 school system through programs such as Library Services and Construction (Titles I and VI), Chapter I/Title I, Title VII Bilingual Education, and others (Padak, Sapin, & Baycich 2002). These funding increases have occurred on the assumption that an integrated family approach to literacy instruction is more effective than addressing the adult and child literacy needs separately. However, there has been little research investigating whether this policy is, in fact, the best way to end intergenerational illiteracy, particularly in urban areas where the problem is the greatest. There is an assumed “value added” dimension of family literacy programming that implies that the dollars spent on family literacy lessen the dollars needed to correct educational difficulties in the children of educationally disadvantaged families.

Although government policy has shifted toward supporting the educational efforts of the family as a whole, there is ample evidence that educating the parent directly impacts the family. A vast body of research, both nationally and internationally, indicates that the education level of the mother is the primary indicator of how well the child will do in school (Birdsall and Cochrane, as cited in Sticht, 1999). Also, Sticht (1999) argues that evidence from studies suggest focusing funds on the education of the children’s parents will lead to better educated, more

employable parents, and more educable children. He concludes: (a) Better educated parents produce better educated children; (b) the parents', and especially the mother's, education level is one of the most important determinants of school participation and achievement; and (c) better educated adults demand and get better schooling for children.

Could it be that the same impact in ending intergenerational illiteracy could be seen by simply educating the parent? To answer this question, a comparison has to be made between similar families, in which one group is enrolled in family literacy programming, while the other is enrolled in a traditional adult-only literacy program. Only when measuring the impact on a large sampling of families and parents exposed to the same types of instruction in classes and programs, and employing the same data collection instruments over a significant time (e.g., two to five years), will we be able to determine if there are significant advantages to family literacy programming. However, no such research has been conducted, yet the dollars still flow to family literacy programs.

Adult Literacy and Multicultural Learners

My fifth question is: To what extent are adult literacy programs effective in their efforts to assist low-literate learners from multicultural backgrounds to obtain an education? Both academic and functional definitions are used to assess the educational attainment of learners from multicultural backgrounds and these learners tend to be among the least educated. For example, the Census Bureau (Current Population Reports, 1999) reported that in March of 1999, 83% of all adults age 25 or older reported they had completed at least a high school diploma, which is a record high. About 25% had obtained a B.S. degree. However, the percentage of H.S. graduates varies by race. It is highest among Whites at 88%, 85 % for Asians and Pacific Islanders, 77% for non-Hispanic Blacks, and 56% for Hispanic adults. During the past decade, the differences between the HS attainment levels of Blacks and Whites has narrowed from 16 percentage points in 1989 (i.e., 65% African American) to 10 percentage points. This is a sign of substantial progress. In regards to functional literacy, the same pattern of racial differentiation is observed. In 1992 the National Adult Literacy Survey asked adults to respond to test items that resembled everyday life tasks involving prose, document and quantitative skills. Five levels of literacy were identified.

Performance on the tests was highly associated with academic achievement. For example, 75% to 80% of adults with 0 to 8 years of education were in Level 1, while fewer than 2% were in Levels 4 and 5. The study found that Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic, and Asian /Pacific Islander adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the lowest two literacy levels. These data suggest that multicultural learners are increasingly represented among the target populations of learners attending adult literacy programs. What program and operational characteristics, and teaching learning approaches are most effective in assisting students from the various race/ethnic populations to succeed in the program?

Conclusion

An adult literacy research agenda should be mindful of the complexity of the issues facing the field. This level of complexity requires a corresponding complexity of research designs. Currently, most of the research produced in the field is completed by doctoral students via dissertation research projects. A strong research agenda would include a sufficient number

of well designed multi-year longitudinal studies by senior faculty and researchers that not only inform policymakers but assist practitioners to more effectively gauge the contributions of their changing practice to the advancement of their ever evolving student populations.

References

References are available upon request.

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